



საგარეო პოლიტიკისა და სტრატეგიული ურთიერთობების კვლევის ფონდი  
GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

46

**REASSESSMENT OF GEOSTRATEGIC THREATS  
FROM THE NORTH CAUCASUS FOR  
GEORGIA'S FOREIGN POLICY**

*BENNETT CLIFFORD*

**EXPERT OPINION**



**2015**



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი  
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## **Introduction**

The Russian North Caucasus is one of the world's most politically dynamic regions. The complex interplay between competing ethnic groups, ideologies and governance systems has created a perpetual conflict atmosphere in which violence can peak or decline depending on the contextual situation. At times, the conflict is contained by Russia's efforts to establish order in the region but at other times it can metastasize and create considerable difficulty for not only Russia but its neighbors as well. It is imperative for governments throughout the Caucasus and Central Asia to closely monitor the situation in the North Caucasus to prevent the spillover of violence onto their territory.

Georgia has a unique relationship with the North Caucasus that is defined by a paradox. Due to its shared border and the growing connectedness between the political situations in the North and South Caucasus, some degree of interaction between Georgia and the North Caucasus is inevitable. On one hand, Georgia's political goals often share the same anti-Russian sentiment as irredentist movements across its northern border. However, for Georgia to overtly acknowledge this mutual grounding with separatist groups can result in dangerous adverse reactions from Russia and security risks within its own territories. Thus, it is imperative for Georgia's government to walk a thin line in its dealings with the North Caucasus based on an informed understanding of the current situation and its various risks.

This article assesses previous Georgian foreign policy strategies towards the North Caucasus; using this background, it analyzes political developments in the North Caucasus from 2012 to the present that warrant a significant shift in how the Georgian government should respond to the issue. Finally, it provides recommendations for potential policies that can address recent changes in the North Caucasus while avoiding negative externalities.

## **History of Georgian Foreign Policy towards Insurgency in the North Caucasus (1991-2015)**

Georgian foreign policy towards the North Caucasus is dependent on two factors: the external risk environment in the North Caucasus and the internal makeup of the Georgian political system.<sup>1</sup> Because the North Caucasus is a particularly troubled area of Russian territory, how Georgia schematically and tactically interacts with its local governments or insurgent movements is a useful barometer for its overall relationship with the Rus-

sian Federation.<sup>2</sup> Throughout Georgia's history, governments with a more strained relationship with Russia have sought to elucidate a specific foreign policy strategy towards the North Caucasus that is distinct from the broader Georgian-Russian relationship. This has included the promotion of Georgian soft power in the North Caucasus, coordination with separatist groups and formal recognition of grievances with Russian policy amongst North Caucasian ethnic groups.<sup>3</sup>

The administration of Georgia's first president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia (1991-1992), generated the most active Georgian foreign policy strategy in the North Caucasus. During Gamsakhurdia's short rule, Georgia collaborated frequently with the separatist government led by Dzhokar Dudayev in the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (ChRI).<sup>4</sup> Georgia was one of the few states in the world to recognize the ChRI's independence and Gamsakhurdia even pushed the idea of a "Caucasian Federation" connecting the territories of Georgia and the North Caucasus under one entity.<sup>5</sup> However, increasing ties to the North Caucasus came at the expense of relationships between the Georgian government and ethnic minorities within its own borders – particularly with the Abkhazians in Abkhazia and the Ossetians of the Tskhinvali region. The resulting civil war (1992-1995) in Georgia removed Gamsakhurdia from power, forced him into exile in Chechnya and ended any chance of completing his pan-Caucasian projects.<sup>6</sup>

After the civil war, Gamsakhurdia's successor, Eduard Shevardnadze (1995-2004), was forced to respond to a much more precarious situation in the North Caucasus. Specifically, the Chechen Wars made it impossible for Georgia to formally engage local political leaders using traditional diplomatic channels. The transition from the First Chechen War (1994-1997) to the Second Chechen War (1999-2009) destroyed most of the regional political infrastructure in the North Caucasus, causing a fill-in by more radical entities.<sup>7</sup> The ChRI government was forced into hiding or out of the Caucasus and the influx of Islamist insurgents from the North Caucasus and abroad created a transnational foreign fighter issue for Georgia.<sup>8</sup> Unlike Gamsakhurdia, Shevardnadze preferred to cooperate directly with the central government in Moscow over issues related to insurgency in the North Caucasus as the Chechen conflict was perceived as a mutual security risk for Russia and Georgia.<sup>9</sup>

After the 2004 Rose Revolution, Western-oriented reformer, Mikheil Saakashvili, became Georgia's president. For the first five years of his presidency, Saakashvili focused more on internal political reform than outward gestures towards Russia and the North Caucasus, albeit heavily utilizing pan-Caucasian rhetoric in the same manner as Gamsakhurdia. After the

2008 Russia-Georgia War and the deterioration of the Georgia-Russia relationship, this rhetoric was converted into action with the unveiling of the North Caucasus Initiative (NCI). This policy strategy created a visa-free regime for North Caucasus residents entering Georgia (but not for any other Russian citizens), increased financial incentives for North Caucasian students studying in Georgian universities, established a Russian-language TV channel (PIK) that broadcasted into the North Caucasus and formally recognized the 19<sup>th</sup> century ethnic cleansing of Circassians by the Russian Empire as a “genocide.”<sup>10</sup> Many viewed the NCI as simply an intent to counter Russian soft power rather than a vested attempt by Saakashvili to reach out to the peoples of the North Caucasus and many of the programs included were purely symbolic or ideological rather than practical.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, several of the policies were criticized by opposition parties on security grounds; in particular, politicians criticized the visa-free regime as possibly allowing insurgents or militants to cross the Georgian border with ease.<sup>12</sup>

After the Georgian Dream coalition government was elected in 2012, many of Saakashvili’s innovations for policy solutions to the North Caucasus were either removed entirely or cut substantially. The government expanded Georgia’s visa-free policy not only for citizens of the North Caucasus but for all Russians and cut funding for PIK TV and academic transfer programs.<sup>13</sup> To avoid the ire of Russia, the new Georgian government has been loath to interact directly with the situation in the North Caucasus. Around the time of critical events in the North Caucasus (such as the 2014 Sochi Olympics), they have engaged in intelligence sharing and cooperation with the Russian government to ensure cross-border security.<sup>14</sup> However, new developments in the North Caucasus over the past few years create risks for Georgia should the current government fail to proactively address them.

## **Emerging Challenges**

Since the re-issuance of the National Security Concept of Georgia in 2011, the nature of the insurgency in the North Caucasus and its attendant risks have both changed drastically. Over the past four years, there has been a significant downturn in both terrorist attacks and attack-related deaths throughout the North Caucasus, particularly in Chechnya.<sup>15</sup> This decrease in total violence appears to be correlated with three separate trends: the decentralization of insurgent networks originating in the North Caucasus, the outflow of militants from the North Caucasus to Syria and Iraq and the devolution of Russia’s security and policing infrastructure to the regional

and republican level.<sup>16</sup> While these factors may have minimized strategic threats from the North Caucasus for the Russian Federation in the short-term, they leave longer term drivers of violence in the region untouched. Additionally, the current condition of the insurgency substantially increases the risk for international movement of militants into the countries in the South Caucasus, particularly through Georgia.<sup>17</sup>

### *Fracturing of Imarat Kavkaz and the Rise of the Islamic State*

The current manifestation of the Imarat Kavkaz (Caucasus Emirate), the group responsible for a majority of insurgent-based attacks in Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia and the Kabardino-Balkar Republic (KBR) after its formation in 2007, is now merely a shadow of its former self. Previously, the Imarat Kavkaz's combination of effective, strategy-focused *emirs*, *shura* governance councils for managing subdivisions and overwhelming local support allowed it to elude the Russian counterinsurgency and conduct a range of potent attacks throughout the North Caucasus. However, from 2012 onward, the Imarat Kavkaz has suffered rapid and frequent leadership transitions, a fragmentation of its organizational infrastructure and declining popular support and prestige.<sup>18</sup> As a result, most of the remaining power in the organization has been delegated to the individual *vilayat* who now make largely independent decisions regarding military targeting, strategy and tactics.<sup>19</sup> Some regional commanders have withdrawn their *bay'ah* to the leadership of the Imarat Kavkaz and instead have pledged support to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi and the Islamic State.<sup>20</sup>

In total, the current period is a moment of transition for the Imarat Kavkaz. After the September 2013 death of its founder, Dokka Umarov, the organization has not found a leader with the same credibility or military-strategic focus, opting instead for Islamic theoreticians to manage its operations. While Umarov had decades of combat experience from the Chechen Wars in the 1990s and the 2000s up until his death, his Dagestani replacement, Aliaskhab Kebekov, was a *mujtahid* (scholar), not a *mujahid* (militant). During his short period as *emir*, Kebekov exercised limited control of the individual militant cells comprising the Imarat Kavkaz; many regional commanders reneged their *bay'ah* or simply disregarded Kebekov's orders.<sup>21</sup> In April 2015, Kebekov was killed in a Russian counter-terrorist operation; his purported successor, Magomed Suleymanov (Abu Osman Gimry), is also a Dagestani *qadi* judge with a similar lack of military experience.<sup>22</sup>

In the wake of these leadership crises, the Russian FSB and republican militia (such as the Kadyrovtsy in Chechnya) have taken advantage of the fragmentation within the Imarat Kavkaz, forcing militants from the major cities and into the mountainous forests of Chechnya and Dagestan or out

of the country altogether.<sup>23</sup> North Caucasus-based jihadists' new primary method of influence, rather than standard attacks and shows of violence, is "parallel integration" through both internet-based recruiting and dissemination of ideology through Salafi mosques.<sup>24</sup> To mistake the end of the Imarat Kavkaz organization for the cessation of insurgent activity in the North Caucasus would be a grave error: through their new strategies, insurgents have internationalized their reach through online media, underground Islamic institutions and extra-regional networks. For example, the Islamic State has now established a formal affiliate in the North Caucasus (Vilayat al-Qawqaz) which will drastically increase its influence in the region.<sup>25</sup> The decentralization of the Imarat Kavkaz and the rise of IS merely changes the nature of the insurgency and thus how policymakers in Russia and the Caucasus should approach the issue.

### *Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq*

Fighters from across the Caucasus are represented in several militant formations currently participating in the civil wars in Syria and Iraq. Estimates of the Caucasian contingency fluctuate; according to the militants, around 1,000 have joined the conflict.<sup>26</sup> They fight on behalf of a number of competing militant formations with highly complex structures of affiliation; the main divide is between militants who pledge support to an Al Qaeda affiliate (either Jabhat al-Nusra or Imarat Kavkaz) and those allied with the Islamic State. The former category includes groups such as Jaish al-Muhajireen w'al-Ansar (Army of Émigrés and Helpers, JMA), who until recently represented the Imarat Kavkaz in Syria, and Junud al-Sham (Fighters of the Levant, JSh), who are more closely affiliated with Jabhat al-Nusra.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, a growing number of North Caucasians fight for the Islamic State, most notably in the Katibat al-Aqsa Brigade under the command of the now infamous *emir*, Umar al-Shishani. Originally the founder of the JMA, Umar al-Shishani defected to the Islamic State in 2013, creating a *fitna* (schism) between North Caucasian militants in Syria and Iraq.<sup>28</sup> While the North Caucasians fighting for the Islamic State (and Umar al-Shishani, specifically) have received a lion's share of the media attention, the JMA, the JSh and independent formations such as Ajnad al-Kavkaz still retain contingents of North Caucasian militants.

Interestingly, the small Kist ethnic group from the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia is disproportionately represented in the leadership of several militant groups on both sides of the AQ/IS divide in Syria and Iraq.<sup>29</sup> Umar al-Shishani (born Tarkhan Batirashvili), a former Georgian Armed Forces member, has drawn an incredible amount of media attention to Pankisi as a potential "hotbed of recruitment" for the Islamic State.<sup>30</sup> While Georgia



will undoubtedly have to deal with the potential repercussions of radicalization and returning militants, media accounts of Pankisi's importance to IS are somewhat exaggerated. Two erroneous assumptions about the situation are widespread: first, that Pankisi is a recruiting site of ideological significance for the Islamic State and secondly, that the potential return of militants from Syria and Iraq to Pankisi will destabilize Georgia entirely. In reality, the villages of Pankisi are isolated and contain a small population of only seven thousand.<sup>31</sup> Of that number, only fifty are reported to be fighting in Syria, not only for IS but for a number of militant formations.<sup>32</sup> While Pankisi residents' representation in jihadist leadership is notable, this mainly stems from previous combat experience in the Chechen Wars and the 2008 Russia-Georgia War.<sup>33</sup>

Additionally, reports overestimate how many militants will eventually return to the Caucasus. Realistically, militants aligned with IS will not attempt return as the cornerstone of their ideology is establishing the caliphate in Syria and the Middle East. One of the major debates in the *fitna* between North Caucasus jihadists is the near enemy/far enemy distinction: whether or not the IS position of overthrowing apostate Muslim governments in the Middle East (near enemy) is more obligatory than Imarat Kavkaz attacks in the Caucasus against Russia (far enemy).<sup>34</sup> For IS militants, conducting *jihad* in Iraq and Syria is preferable to "eating leaves" in the mountain forests of the Caucasus.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, it is much more likely that those who retain *bay'ah* to the Imarat Kavkaz will return to the Caucasian theatre, especially given the outright collapse of the parent organization and the recent removal of Caucasians from leadership positions of AQ affiliates in Syria.<sup>36</sup> While all militants face significant barriers to return, even a few returning fighters could provide leadership and combat experience that could be essential to revitalizing insurgent movements in the North Caucasus. The states of the South Caucasus, including Georgia, are likely transit corridors for these militants.<sup>37</sup>

Another largely ignored issue for Georgian policymakers is the radicalization of Muslim minorities within the Georgian population. While Pankisi's Kists and Chechens only number a few thousand, the total Muslim population in Georgia, including Azerbaijanis, Georgian Muslims from Ajara and North Caucasians outside of Pankisi, is hundreds of thousands strong. Unfortunately, the current status and treatment of the Muslim minority in Georgia generates strong motivations for radicalization. Muslim communities are often poorly integrated, there exist barriers to free religious practice and development of independent religious institutions and there is an overall lack of socioeconomic opportunity in Muslim-majority areas, particularly for youth.<sup>38</sup> There are recent reports of Georgian Azerbaijanis

leaving to fight in Syria from villages in the south-eastern regions of Georgia and the village of Qarajala near Telavi.<sup>39</sup> Georgian Muslims from Ajara in the south-west are now also fighting in the Middle East.<sup>40</sup> To address this growing issue, Georgia needs to design a comprehensive strategy to eliminate the underlying causes of jihadist recruitment and Islamic extremism within the country.

### *The “Kadyrov” Dilemma*

Over the past decade, the Russian federal government has directly intervened in the political landscape of its North Caucasus republics to ensure that Moscow-friendly regional leaders remain in power. To achieve this end, the federal government opts to bypass local parliamentary votes to select the heads of the North Caucasus republics deemed “security risks.” The most prominent example of this strategy is in the Chechen Republic where Ramzan Kadyrov has maintained unilateral control since his appointment in 2007.<sup>41</sup> Moscow’s relationship with Kadyrov and other North Caucasus regional heads is both symbiotic and parasitic. The federal government is dependent on its regional heads to maintain order and manage violence that is endemic to the North Caucasus. However, this federal structure is also highly unstable and can create a “feedback loop:” in exchange for managing the security situation, each republican head is granted virtually limitless control of their republics, creating corruption, clan-based and ethnic conflict, endemic social problems, economic mismanagement and human rights abuses.<sup>42</sup> Ultimately, these negative side effects can have a deleterious effect on the security situation in the North Caucasus and constitute important underlying motives for continued insurgent activity.

Direct appointment leadership models leave Moscow with no contingency option should the situation escalate. The current situation in Chechnya demonstrates the enormous amount of leeway Moscow is willing to provide its regional leaders. For the past year, Ramzan Kadyrov has tested the limits of his power as republican head, often times leading to conflicts with federal agencies. The latest incident stemmed from the February 2015 assassination of Boris Nemtsov in Moscow; several former members of Kadyrov’s security forces in Chechnya have been accused.<sup>43</sup> A resulting FSB manhunt led to an order from Kadyrov to republican police forces to “shoot to kill” any non-Chechen police that enters Chechnya.<sup>44</sup> Other North Caucasian leaders (most notably Ramazan Abdulatipov in Dagestan) have defended Kadyrov’s controversial order whereas many federal entities (e.g., the FSB, Interior Ministry, and Investigative Committee) have lambasted Kadyrov. For the first time, there appears to be dissent within

the federal government in terms of whether or not Kadyrov's efficiency is more important than his overwhelming reaches for power.

Despite this, Kadyrov is unlikely to be removed from his post in the near future: his connections with Russia's leadership (especially Vladimir Putin) are too strong.<sup>45</sup> Officially, his second (and final) term ends in 2016 but the Russian legislature is already considering legislation to allow republican heads a third consecutive term.<sup>46</sup> Yet, growing federal dissatisfaction with Kadyrov could prompt greater conflict between Chechnya and the center, and the overzealous Kadyrov will continue to spite the FSB and federal agencies by exerting his own independent control of the republic. Furthermore, because other republican heads of the North Caucasus were selected along the same parameters in Kadyrov, there is a growing concern that they will begin to emulate his power grabs.<sup>47</sup> While Kadyrov has demonstrated his immunity to federal pressure, other leaders do not have the same degree of connection to the federal government and may be forced into resignation.<sup>48</sup> Resulting leadership transitions in other regions of the North Caucasus, including Dagestan, Ingushetia and the Kabardino-Balkar Republic, may provide a flashpoint for insurgent activity.

Additionally, the Russian Federation's overinvestment in the North Caucasus rests on a thin economic foundation due to the ruble crisis, the effect of international sanctions and the war in East Ukraine. Currently, the North Caucasus Federal District (NCFD) is the most highly subsidized region within Russia; the large influx of funds was intended to help the republics rebuild after the Second Chechen War and assist in developing republic-level security forces.<sup>49</sup> However, the federal government's precarious economic position and calls from the public to "stop feeding the [North] Caucasus" make it likely that existing subsidies will be cut substantially. In this case, republican heads will have an increasingly difficult time retaining power and the failing economic situation could be a powerful factor in re-escalating regional conflicts.

### **Implications for Georgia's Foreign Policy**

Georgia's major national security priorities are threefold: forestalling Russian intervention and aggression, maintaining internal territorial integrity and pursuing integration with Western multilateral institutions through cooperation with Euro-Atlantic allies.<sup>50</sup> How Georgia responds to conflict in the North Caucasus affects all three priorities. Currently, the Georgian Dream coalition government's foreign policy doctrine prioritizes reaching détente with Russia while continuing the path towards membership in the European Union and NATO. Due to its somewhat conflicting goals, this strategy requires a cautious balance and thus could be derailed by

the situation in the North Caucasus if Georgia does not establish proactive strategy to address emerging challenges. Analysts have criticized the current government's response to insurgency in the North Caucasus and radicalization within its borders as "not having a [strategy] at all," leaving Georgia extremely vulnerable to the negative side effects of the geopolitical situation.<sup>51</sup>

Of utmost concern for Georgia is the potential for the Russian Federation to exploit its fears of terrorist movement or radicalization as a justification for an increase of military activity on Georgian territory. In recent months, Russian officials have made dramatic claims about the level of terrorist recruitment within Georgia's borders as well as criticized Georgia's abilities to manage its borders with Russia and Turkey.<sup>52</sup> Destabilization of the North Caucasus could influence Russia to take an aggressive stance towards the Pankisi Gorge and other regions with large Muslim populations in Georgia in a similar context as the Pankisi crisis in the early 2000s.<sup>53</sup> When Al Qaeda-affiliated Chechen forces led by Ruslan Gelayev took refuge in Pankisi in 2002, the Russian military sent bombing raids into Georgian territory to disrupt militant activity. While a full-scale Russian military intervention did not occur, the bombing campaign created a diplomatic row that effectually ended the Shevardnadze government's chances of maintaining a benevolent relationship with Moscow.<sup>54</sup> The current status of Georgian-Russian relations, despite the Georgian Dream's attempts to avoid irritating Moscow, is unreciprocated by the Russian leadership and therefore incredibly fragile. If Russia feels compelled to take the militant transit situation into its own hands, a hostile and potentially violent stand-off between Russia and Georgia is possible.

The decentralized nature of the insurgency in the North Caucasus also may have deleterious effects on Georgia's internal stability and security. Jihadist networks have now internationalized their range of operations beyond the North Caucasus proper, creating two important implications for Georgian national security. First, the risk of militant groups accidentally or intentionally crossing the Georgian-Russian border from Dagestan and Chechnya has increased with the collapse of the Imarat Kavkaz's leadership; smaller individual groups relocate to border regions (rather than major cities) and are far less risk averse in planning and targeting.<sup>55</sup> This is best demonstrated by the 2012 Lopota Valley incident where a group of Dagestan-based militants crossed the mountains into Georgia and took several people hostage, eventually killing fourteen people in a firefight.<sup>56</sup> Second, and more importantly, North Caucasian militants seeking to enter Syria or Iraq may use Georgia as a transit route to south-east Turkey, the most common point of entry for foreign fighters.

However, contrary to Georgian popular fear, radicalization within Georgia is unlikely to result in terrorist attacks within Georgia or the destabilization of entire areas, such as Pankisi, the Azerbaijani towns in the south-east or Ajara. The flow of militants from these areas is primarily outward, not inward, and it seems highly unlikely that fighters in Syria and Iraq would consider return to Georgia for the purposes of conducting *jihad*. Militants from the North Caucasus view Georgia as a transit point, not a final destination. From Syria and Iraq, return by Caucasus-based militants to Georgia or the North Caucasus would be immensely difficult: geographic barriers, retaliation from group leadership and punitive measures enacted by their home countries against foreign fighters dissuade the majority of potential returnees.<sup>57</sup> Instead, the major concern for Georgia should be to address foreign fighter radicalization and transit proactively so that the issue does not impact its other foreign policy priorities.

Georgia should also be concerned about the growing establishment of autonomy by regional leaders in the North Caucasus especially due to the impact on the political situation in the “occupied territories” (Tskhinvali/Abkhazia). Geopolitically, the “division” between the North and South Caucasus is a heuristic that fails to account for the interconnectedness between ethnic, national, religious and political groups on both sides of the border.<sup>58</sup> Political trends in the North Caucasus have a potent impact on the situation in Georgia’s “occupied territories.” Tskhinvali’s leadership and political base is directly connected to that of regional heads of their neighbors (and Ossetian co-ethnics) in the Russian Republic of North Ossetia-Alania while Abkhazians share a common heritage with Circassian groups (e.g., Kabardins, Adyghes and Abazas) across the border in the KBR, the Karachay-Cherkess Republic (KCR) and the Republic of Adygea.<sup>59</sup> Ethnic tension, corruption and clan conflict in the North Caucasus can contribute to irredentism within Georgia’s occupied territories and calls for independence or Russian integration.<sup>60</sup> Additionally, many North Caucasus-based militants fought on behalf of separatist campaigns by Abkhazia and Tskhinvali during both the 1992 Civil War and the 2008 Russia-Georgia War.<sup>61</sup> While the “new brand” of Salafi-jihadists are unlikely to take up arms in the Georgian occupied territories, republican troops commanded by Ramzan Kadyrov or other North Caucasus heads could easily be utilized by Russia in support of Tskhinvali or Abkhazia’s independence. Several Chechen battalions are now reported to be fighting on behalf of the separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk in Ukraine.<sup>62</sup> This “source” of North Caucasus-based foreign fighters is often underestimated by regional analysts who solely focus on fighters in Syria and Iraq.

Fortunately, Georgia has the potential to use the situation to its political advantage. It shares the problem of radicalization and the rise of the Islam-

ic State with other Western European states and could utilize the mutual issue to increase cooperation with the EU, NATO and OSCE member states to combat extremism. Georgia has already unrolled a new border security program and tracking database to prevent militant movement in and out of the country with substantial aid from the United States.<sup>63</sup> However, there are two major problems with current iterations of Georgia's cooperative measures with the West to counter the threat of transnational terrorism. Currently, there are very few measures to prevent the underlying sources of terrorist movement and radicalization within Georgia through the lens of countering violent extremism (CVE). There are only baseline punitive measures that are aimed at arresting and sentencing would-be terrorists or returning fighters. These policies are necessary but insufficient to counter the risk that transnational terrorism poses to Georgia: they are limited in their ability to track international jihadist movement and do not address the root cause of radicalization. Georgia must work with its regional and Euro-Atlantic partners not only on developing border security and an appropriate strategy for returning fighters but also towards preventative measures to combat extremism at its source.

### **Potential Strategic Approaches**

Georgia now faces previously unanticipated risks stemming mainly from the North Caucasus but also from radicalization within its own borders. Like many of Georgia's other foreign policy options, how it chooses to approach these issues is heavily constrained by geopolitical realities. Most notably, it is forced to both push for further integration with Europe and the West while not provoking its powerful northern neighbor, Russia. For its counterterrorism policy, particularly as it pertains to the North Caucasus, Georgia must straddle a thin line – that is, it must create strategies for preventing the spillover of terrorism into its borders while at the same time recognizing that any formal strategic dealings with the North Caucasus are likely to infuriate Russia. With this paradox in mind, Georgian policymakers must utilize as many informal, track-II and track-III level initiatives to maintain a working relationship with the societies of the North Caucasus. Governmental or diplomatic mechanisms of contact with the North Caucasus, through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or other foreign policy agencies, are limited in their effectiveness due to the lack of a concrete relationship between Georgia and Russia. Moreover, they may be perceived by Russian policymakers as “intrusion” into a particularly sensitive area of Russia's territory. The following recommendations include ways for Georgia to create a healthy relationship with the Russian North Caucasus while minimizing strategic irritants to the Russian Federation.

- *Strengthen border cooperation with regional partners; most notably, Turkey and Azerbaijan, to combat transnational jihadist movement.*

Transnational jihadist movement and radicalization are not problems that Georgia faces alone. While efforts to coordinate with Western partners are extant, Georgia must additionally turn to its own region to provide more localized solutions to porous borders and regional conflicts that can induce radicalization. It is very difficult for Georgia to effectively police its northern border with Russia to prevent Russian citizens from crossing into Georgia en route to Syria and Iraq due to the mountainous landscape, disputed territories and local distrust of border security measures.<sup>64</sup> However, these same factors make it incredibly difficult for potential militants to cross the border in the first place.<sup>65</sup> Thus, limiting entry will prevent far less transit than controlling exit. To cast a wider net, Georgia should look towards securing its eastern and southern borders to ensure that militants are captured in the country before they leave for a third destination. This requires close cooperation with its neighbors (Turkey, Armenia and Azerbaijan) to secure the potential exit portals for would-be fighters in Syria and Iraq.

Regional cooperation can also entail general benefits for the Georgian government in its fight against Islamic extremism. Because Azerbaijan and Turkey are also waypoints for militants attempting to enter Syria, coordination with intelligence, border enforcement and police agencies in all three countries can help to trace the movement of jihadists and provide valuable intelligence on the routes that jihadists use to leave the North and South Caucasus for Syria and Iraq. Additionally, should militants leave Syria and Iraq in the future to return to the Caucasus, an established intel-sharing system will already be in place to track down any potential absconders.

One complication with this strategy is managing the complex relationships other regional actors have with the current conflict in Syria and Iraq. Turkey, for example, is not only potentially considering increasing its military presence in the region for the purpose of defeating IS and other Salafi-jihadist groups but also for preventing the rise of Kurdish separatism in the region writ large.<sup>66</sup> However, regional Caucasus and Black Sea-based counterterrorism cooperation poses far less negative side effects for Georgia than the existing strategy of coordinating only with the Russian Federation. Russia has used Georgian information about foreign fighters only when it benefits them and does not reciprocate information sharing for militants travelling in the opposite direction.<sup>67</sup> Additionally, Russia could use intelligence learned from Georgian sources against Georgia to

use militant transit and radicalization as a precursor for increased military presence on Georgian territory.

- *Develop a comprehensive strategy for countering violent extremism (CVE) including local civil society and collaboration with other European states through multinational forums.*

The methodology of countering violent extremism (CVE) refers to localized community driven measures to prevent the spread of extremist ideology within specific subsectors of the population which may be prone to radicalization.<sup>68</sup> CVE measures have been utilized by several governments, non-governmental organizations and regional and local political actors to effectively prevent several contextual forms of extremism at their source. While CVE approaches are not always mutually exclusive with traditional counterterrorism strategies (interdiction, policing, security/intelligence operations), a delicate balance has to be reached between the two to prevent “mission creep.”<sup>69</sup> That is, certain counterterror tactics can alienate local communities, destroy their trust in government organizations and eventually contribute to radicalization. Thus, CVE and counterterrorism methods can be symbiotic elements of a national strategy against violent extremism only when they are both operating at maximum efficiency.

Georgia’s current anti-terrorist strategy relies heavily on traditional counterterror strategies but they are relatively ineffective. They prefer displays of overwhelming force with little objective and often times those captured in raids in border zones, Pankisi, Ajara or Kvemo Kartli, are quickly released due to lack of evidence.<sup>70</sup> The only result from current tactics is a negative reaction by local communities to police raids. More importantly, no CVE measures presently exist in Georgia. If Georgia continues to utilize a disproportionate use of police force in Muslim-majority regions without providing education opportunities, civil society initiatives and preventative measures against the spread of ideology, Muslims from Georgia will continue to find solace in combat in Syria and Iraq.

In comparison to other states in the Caucasus, Georgia enjoys the advantage of a relatively well developed NGO and civil society sector, many of which have experience in working in minority regions.<sup>71</sup> The Georgian government should continue to refine its counterterrorism methods while opening up space and funding for local civil society organizations to conduct CVE in areas that are prone to radicalization. CVE must operate on a local stage with previously marginalized voices (Islamic leaders, women, youth) playing a larger role in counter-recruitment.<sup>72</sup> Coordination with other Western actors, many of whom have already well-developed CVE programs and effective counterterror strategies, is paramount for the Georgian government to develop solutions that work in Georgia. Overly



punitive measures, such as large police raids of villages and arrest sentencing for returning fighters, will detract from a successful CVE program and continue the cycle of radicalization. Returning fighters can be a valuable asset in a CVE program as local trusted voices who have effectively renounced the fight abroad in Syria and Iraq and can return to communities to convince others not to join.<sup>73</sup> They are also excellent intelligence sources about militants travelling abroad. Harsh sentencing discourages the possibility of their return and thus the potential for the Georgian government to utilize their extensive knowledge in the fight against recruitment and transnational movement of jihadists.

- *Continue track-II and track-III level initiatives for engagement with the North Caucasus specifically through educational and scientific cooperation.*

Of the Saakashvili-era “soft power” approaches to the North Caucasus, one program in particular appeared to have a certain value for Georgia’s policymaking sector without outwardly angering Russia. Increased educational and scientific contact between the universities and academics of the North and South Caucasus gave decisionmakers increased access to knowledge about the developing and complex situations in the Russian republics north of Georgia.<sup>74</sup> Unfortunately, these peer-to-peer contact programs were swept away with the rest of the North Caucasus Initiative by the Georgian Dream government in 2013.<sup>75</sup> Georgia now has a dearth of experts who are well-versed in recent changes in the North Caucasus and less students from the North Caucasus are coming to study in Georgian universities.<sup>76</sup>

Educational and scientific cooperation between Georgia and the North Caucasus is paramount; due to the complexities inherent in the North Caucasus region, Georgian policymakers, diplomats and scholars must stay abreast of recent developments to adequately craft long-term policies.<sup>77</sup> North Caucasian students who travel to study in Georgian universities can be valuable contacts when they return to their home countries and can provide additional intelligence about the political situation and potential risks for Georgia. Since Georgia already has extensive university-to-university contact with scholars in other regions of Russia, there is less of a chance that re-establishing educational transfer with the North Caucasus will provoke an aggressive Russian response.<sup>78</sup>

Georgia’s major lesson from the 2011 “adventure” into the politics of the North Caucasus is that it possesses a large amount of latent soft power in several of the major republics but it must be extremely careful in how it wields its influence.<sup>79</sup> This is especially true in the areas of education and scientific cooperation – Georgia’s NGO sector is significantly more de-

veloped than anything in the North Caucasus and Tbilisi State University remains a regional hub for the study of the Caucasus as a whole. Yet, because peer-to-peer educational contact programs mainly existed at a non-governmental (track-II and track-III) level, they did not cause much backlash in Moscow.<sup>80</sup> The more risky policies were ones that attempted to create a divide between the North Caucasus and the rest of Russia – such as the formal recognition of the Circassian genocide, the Russian-language TV channel aimed specifically at the North Caucasus and the visa-free regime for only citizens of North Caucasus republics (but not other Russian citizens).<sup>81</sup> Many of these programs only existed at the governmental (track-I) level which created unnecessary tensions in the relationship between Russia and Georgia. Hopefully, re-establishing educational transfer can aid Georgian policymakers with increased knowledge about the situation in the North Caucasus and how to craft responsible policies that can prevent external impacts on Georgia's security situation.

## **Conclusion**

Innovative non-traditional foreign policies are necessary for Georgia to develop a working relationship with the peoples of the North Caucasus. Working solely through the Russian federal government leaves Georgia in the dark regarding new political developments in the region along its northern border; analytically bifurcating the North Caucasus from the rest of Russia provokes violent responses from Moscow. A careful middle ground – through educational transfer, society-to-society initiatives and regional cooperation – is necessary not only to maximize Georgia's security in the broader Caucasus region but also to educate the future generation of Georgian policymakers about risks emanating from the North Caucasus.

By no means does Georgia face these threats (radicalization, international terrorist migration, risk of spillover of political violence) alone. Fortunately, this allows Georgia to draw on a wider base of knowledge on potential successful solutions as well as increased room for cooperation with its neighbors and allies. For Georgia, a successful North Caucasus policy that makes use of regional resources while avoiding Russian backlash would indeed be “one of the [most] important and tangible [achievements] in the foreign policy of Georgia during the last decade.”<sup>82</sup>

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